

Pope John Paul II

Remarks by Rabbi Moshe Shulman
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As a Rabbi, as a Jew, and as a human being, I feel great sadness at the loss of Pope John Paul II.

As a Rabbi, I am often called upon to guide people in life, and in death. As a religious leader, Pope John Paul II stood before the world to uphold religious values and principles of life and death, many of which are shared by all faiths, including Judaism. This includes principles such as the infinite value of human life, the inadmissibility of the “quality of life” as a factor in medical ethics, the courage to face death as a prelude to an eternal spiritual life, the commitment to the sanctity of marriage between man and woman, and many more.

Pope John Paul II challenged Jew, Christian, Moslem and members of all faiths to work together to find common ground, and advance the cause of humanity.

As a Jew, Pope John Paul II was a man who reached out on behalf of the church to help end Church sponsored anti-Semitic doctrine. He was the first Pope to publicly acknowledge the horrors of the Holocaust, and the role of Christian anti-Semitism in aiding and abetting that dark period of history.

His unique relationship with the Jewish people is encapsulated in the following story. In 1942, a Jewish couple in the Krakow ghetto entrusted their son to a childless Polish Catholic couple, in order to save him from the Germans. When the war was over the boy’s adoptive parents brought him to a young priest to be baptized. When the young priest learned that the orphan’s parents had asked that he be returned to the Jewish people, the priest refused to baptize the boy. That priest was Karol Wojtyla, known today as Pope John Paul II.

We remember him as one who forever remained a friend of the Jewish people.

On March 26, 2000, Pope John Paul II came to Jerusalem, and prayed at the Western Wall. At the time, he placed a prayer in the Wall which read:

*God of our fathers,
You chose Abraham and his descendants
To bring Your name to the nations;
We are deeply saddened
By the behaviour of those
Who in the course of history
Have caused these children of Yours to suffer
And asking Your forgiveness
We wish to commit ourselves
To genuine brotherhood
With the people of the Covenant.*

He became the first pope in the history of the Church to officially recognise that the Jewish

people remain the people of the Covenant.

Five years ago, that trip coincided precisely with the portion of Parah, which we read this past Shabbat in the Synagogue. In the Haftorah of this portion, the prophet Ezekiel describes Israel's exile amongst the nations as an existential “desecration of G_d's name”, because the nations of the world would misunderstand our exile as theological proof for the theology of *supercessionism*, the notion that they, the nations, had replaced Israel, and that Israel had been rejected by G_d.

The prophet also describes how the return of Israel to its land would offer proof of the fallaciousness of this theology. *At that time*, says the prophets, *the nations of the world will know that I, G_d, have brought you back to your land*, and have reaffirmed the same Covenant with Israel that began with Abraham.

It was this doctrine of the Church which, for decades, prevented it from ever recognising the State of Israel as a Jewish state. Pope John Paul II challenged that doctrine, becoming the first pope to recognise the State of Israel.

How profound then, even providential, that the end of his mission should coincide with the reading in the Synagogues of this portion, given that it was Pope John Paul II who re-wrote this doctrine of Christian theology, as described by Ezekiel 2500 years ago!

As a human being, one could not help but be inspired by his calling for all humanity, and his devotion to the cause of peace for all mankind. Many popes before him used their power and influence to strengthen the Church at the expense of Humanity. Pope John Paul II fought for Humanity, sometimes at the expense of the Church.

Today, the world is better off because of his work.

In the tragic death of Aaron's two sons, Moses tries to comfort Aaron with the words: *Be'krovai ekadesh - through those close to Me I am sanctified, ve'al pnei kol ha'am ekaved – and before all the people am I honoured.*

What does this mean?

Perhaps we can suggest the following interpretation. Through the response to death of those closest to me, my name is sanctified and honoured in the eyes of all the people, who see that faith gives strength and hope even in face of tragedy.

When a man of faith faces death with courage and dignity, as was demanded of Aaron, it brings honour to faith as a whole, and every faith that is based on the dignity of the human spirit and the Divine spark of the human being benefits.

When survivors of tragedy face such heart-wrenching moments of life with strength and stoicism, with a strength that emanates from their faith and trust in G_d, without for a moment diminishing the pain of their suffering and loss, that brings honour to faith as a whole.

People of all faiths can benefit from the strength, courage, and dignity of Pope John Paul II, from the way he faced the challenges of life, and the dignity with which he faced death.

Certainly between Judaism and Christianity there are fundamental differences in theology, even irreconcilable differences in theology. Certainly between the Jewish people and Pope John Paul II there were some disagreements over the years.

But he was a man who brought honour and dignity not only to his faith, but to all faiths, not only to his people, but to all people. And no nation on earth benefited more from his embrace than we!!

May G_d bless his soul.